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China By the Numbers: The Chinese Professor and the Red Emperor

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By Charles W. Hayford

Remember those jailbirds who know all of each others' jokes? They don't tell the whole joke, just shout out the number from the jokebook. Our public discourse on China has something of the same quality. Instead of shouting out a number, however, somebody "shouts out" a word or an image which evokes a whole China story. These stories can be persuasive, poetic, or insightful, but when we only "shout out" the number, then we don't have the chance to examine the whole story. Painful facts or challenges to venerable beliefs can be papered over when the story is a misleading relic.

Working for the Chinese or Flunking the Chinese Professor?

In the recent U.S. elections, campaigns "shouted out" numbers for many classic China stories. As early as February, Steven Mufson and John Pomfret's *Washington Post* article, "[There's A New Red Scare: But Is It So Scary?](#)" responded to Sen. Lindsay Graham's warning, "China's going to eat our lunch." Did nobody think to say that we had gotten our lunch at Panda Express anyway? But the stories continued. David Chen in the *New York Times* reported "[China Emerges as a Scapegoat in Campaign Ads](#)" and Jeff Yang posted "[Politicians Play the China Card](#)" on his National Public Radio blog, each with links to many examples. There were more Chinese flags, [Chineesy](#) music, and Chinese language than during any campaign in history. One candidate sarcastically thanked his opponent for creating jobs — in China. "[Xie xie](#)", he said.

These stories resonate with long term Western worries about China's size and seeming longevity (in fact, Chinese civilization did not start earlier than others, but has maintained continuity — or the myth of continuity). Americans have sometimes viewed China as a source of "[cheap Chinese labor](#)," leading to immigration exclusion laws, and sometimes as home to millions of potential customers. If you want to see how these have worked out in popular TV shows, films, games, and comics, visit the website [TV.tropes](#), a wiki devoted to "tropes," which the site's editors define as "devices and conventions that a writer can reasonably rely on as being present in the audience members' minds and expectations." Dozens of reader-contributed lists include "[China Takes Over the World](#)," "[Yellow Peril](#)," "[Red Scare](#)," and even "[Digging to China](#)." Too bad they don't cover political ads and news media.

That's because the sharpest example from the recent election was "[The Chinese Professor](#)," presumably America's first national political commercial in Mandarin. The sixty-second video, with English subtitles, was produced by [Citizens Against Government Waste](#) to attack federal deficits by dramatizing the China of the future.

The opening shot, captioned "Beijing China 2030," shows a what looks like a business school classroom. There are [casually dressed students](#) and (amazingly!) Cultural Revolution Mao posters on the walls. Then we see the feet of the Chinese professor as he comes down a darkened runway, each step echoing ominously. He explains — in Chinese, remember — that the great empires of history collapsed one by one: the Greek, the Roman, the British... the American. The reason? Because "they turned their backs on their founding principles." America fell because, in the midst of a recession, it relied on government stimulus spending, takeover of industries, big changes in health care systems, and massive debt. That, our professor concludes with a sardonic chuckle, "is why they work for us today."

Jeremiah Jenne at *Jottings from the Granite Studio* debunked the ad as "[Ignorant Incurious Certitude](#)," but [James Fallows](#) at the *Atlantic* called it "the first spot from this campaign season you can imagine people actually remembering a decade from now." He allows that "if you know anything about the Chinese economy, the actual analytical content here is hilariously wrong" since three of the causes given for America's decline have been crucial in the success of China's anti-recession policy.

Alan Baumler's [Yellow Peril Mk 3](#) at *Frog in a Well* called "The Chinese Professor" an "updated [Fu Manchu](#)." "Mk 3," you of course know, is [Mortal Kombat 3](#), the fighting game, and you will also doubtless recall the 1932 film, *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, in which the mad doctor schemes to find the sword of Genghis Khan and rouse all Asia to "wipe out the white race" and rule the world. Today's version: "you will work for us."



Boris Karloff as Fu Manchu. Image from imdb.

Certitude is impervious to facts, but sometimes ridicule helps. Jeff Yang's NPR piece linked to a parody contest at [Angry Asian Man](#). Fallows introduced a deadly funny [animation](#) by the Taiwan-based [Next Media Animation](#) in which a panda takes the role of the "Chinese professor." The panda professor asks, "what makes a nation grow? Freedom?" He laughs. "No, it's selling cheap crap to gullible foreigners... stealing technology from Steve Jobs." Besides, he concludes, "we have motherf**cking pandas who can talk."

Red Emperors or Communist CEOs?

The story which animates both Dr. Fu and the "Chinese Professor" is that of a once and future Chinese empire, the Middle Kingdom, returned from the dead. Other related "shout outs" also evoke an unchanging China. One is to call the People's Republic a "New Dynasty," "People's Middle Kingdom," or ["Enduring Empire."](#) Another is to label the Chinese leader the ["Red Emperor,"](#) "People's Emperor," or even the classic "Emperor of the Blue Ants." Other examples are [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

Recently even the London-based *Economist*, often a font of crisp good sense, published a lead editorial, ["China's Succession: The Next Emperor,"](#) calling Xi Jinping a "crown prince" who was "anointed in a vast kingdom facing vaster stresses." We are told not to think of a "self-confident, rational power that has come of age" but of a "paranoid, introspective imperial court."

When a poet uses the metaphor "my love is a rose," it's not literal. We do not expect to see him with a watering can and pruning shears. He's saying she's sweet. Likewise, "emperor" and "dynasty" are one-word metaphors which, when used to start a discussion rather than cap one, are useful in sparking intuitive understanding and exploration. But used glibly, these words actually let China's rulers off the hook. They become clichés which imply that there is no use discussing how the regime could become more responsive and effective since China is simply authoritarian by nature. Who could change "the China of 5,000 years"?

To be sure, Chinese themselves talk incessantly about emperors, courtiers, and dynasties. Xi Jinping is known as one of the *Taizi Dang*, or ["Princelings Faction."](#) But what's sauce for the oriental goose should

be sauce for the western gander. Xi's father rose in Chinese politics at about the time that George W. Bush's father rose in American politics, but only young Mr. Xi called a "crown prince."

I will also concede that Mao Zedong compared himself to Qin Shi Huangdi, who unified China and invented the title "Huangdi," which we translate as "emperor," and to Zhu Yuanzhang, the founding emperor of the Ming Dynasty. Paradoxically, Mao admired both George Washington and Stalin as nation-builders, and as a revolutionary he destroyed the "feudal China" of the emperors, then boasted that he was a better poet than any of them. But no emperor built or destroyed on the scale that Mao did. In this, he is thoroughly modern.

Geremie Barmé wrestles with this conundrum in a classy essay, "For Truly Great Men, Look to This Age Alone — Was Mao Zedong a New Emperor?," in Timothy Cheek's [A Critical Introduction to Mao](#) (2010 — disclaimer: I have an essay there too). Barmé agrees that calling the Great Helmsman a "Red Emperor" is "careless essentialism" that promotes a "belief in an unchanging Chinese essence that pre-determines political or cultural behaviour." On the other hand, he argues with supreme persuasiveness that to ignore the "imperial and the dynastic" in Mao's China is to "blind ourselves to the persistence, reinvention, manipulation and limitations of tradition." The trick, Barmé shows, is not to accept Mao's imperial vocabulary at face value but to dig out what work Mao wanted the terms to do in a particular situation.

So what word should we use instead of "Red Emperor"? "New Great Helmsman" is way too Cultural Revolution. "Head Honcho" is out because it's Japanese. The Mongol ruler of China was a "Khan," but that's another foreign word. "The Country's Quarterback" wouldn't fly in a soccer country. Nowadays, China seems one huge business conglomerate run by a Party CEO. Why not ditch the metaphors and stick to the actual title, "President of China"?

As I was finishing this piece, *China Beat* ran William Callahan's review of John and Doris Naisbitt's [China's Megatrends: The Eight Pillars of a New Society](#). Callahan points out that due to "the tight ideological control of the Chinese media" we cannot "easily separate 'the facts' from the narrative promoted by the CCP's Central Propaganda Department." The narrative is shaped by the party-state's "official formulations" (*tifa* 提法), such as "emancipation of the mind," "learn truth from facts," "crossing the river by feeling for stones," "scientific development and social harmony."

The PRC's *tifa* are tightly reined but sometimes the West's free-range tropes also make it hard to discern "the facts." The campaigns ads and commentaries raise real issues, but they refer us to stories which are dubious or even dangerous.

Charles W. Hayford is Visiting Scholar, Department of History, Northwestern University, and Editor, Journal of American-East Asian Relations. His piece ["When Is a Farmer Not A Farmer? When He's Chinese, Then He's a Peasant"](#) (Frog in A Well) argues that before 1949, the story in the word "peasant" was that China was "feudal" and in need of revolution.